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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000674

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI SAYS SPEAKER ELECTION AT END OF JUNE

REF: BEIRUT 668

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a June 16 meeting with the Ambassador, a relaxed Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri expressed satisfaction regarding the recent legislative elections and predicted cabinet formation would occur smoothly and quickly. Berri has made clear publicly and privately that he supports Saad Hariri as Lebanon's next Prime Minister. Berri claimed he prefers a small cabinet -- ten members instead of the current 30 -- to reduce chances the government will be hamstrung by the competing interests of its members. He argued for full implementation of Taif Accord, abolishing sectarianism, establishing a bicameral system to decide major issues and passing a new electoral law based on proportional representation.

2. (C) Regarding Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's June 14 speech, Berri echoed the criticisms of other Lebanese leaders. Netanyahu sought to reduce Palestinians to "less than citizens," Berri argued, and avoided mention of a two-state solution or the settlement of Palestinian refugees, a particular concern to the Lebanese. End summary.

FORMING THE GOVERNMENT

3. (C) Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, accompanied by advisor Ali Hamdan and Amal MP Ali Bazzi, told the Ambassador on June 16 that he expected parliament to convene a session to elect the speaker at the end of June. (Note: Berri is widely expected to remain in his post, septel. End note.) MP Abdel Latif Zein, as the oldest MP, would call the new parliament into session "in coordination" with Berri, the speaker said. Berri said he would need about two weeks to invite Lebanon's key leaders, including the Lebanese Armed Forces Commander, Central Bank Governor and journalists. (Note: The current parliament is officially disbanded as of midnight Saturday June 20, and a session must be convened within two weeks to elect the speaker of parliament. Press and several MPs we have spoken with expect the session June 23, but Berri is the key decision maker regarding the dates

of actions in Parliament. Berri also reported he would consult with foreign ambassadors, but later corrected himself to specify "Arab Ambassadors." End note.)

14. (C) Improved relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia and between the United States and Syria could help speed Lebanon's cabinet formation, Berri said, and he saw no obstacles to a quick conclusion. He added that he prefers a small cabinet, such as the ten-member 1984 cabinet in which he was a minister. Despite its small number of members, that cabinet fully represented each sect with strong leaders, Berri said. (Note: Lebanon's cabinets were much smaller in the past, comprised of four or eight ministers several times in the 1950's. Post-Taif, cabinets have been able to include representatives from more of Lebanon's minority sects, but winning decisions is more complicated. End note.)

15. (C) Berri, assuming he would be speaker in the next government, said he would offer March 14 majority leader Saad Hariri the unanimous backing of all MPs to be prime minister, which would show Hariri that he had not only won a majority in June 7 elections but also was supported by all political groupings. In exchange, Berri said he would ask Hariri to "rise above" the March 14 and March 8 divisions in parliament to be an "unbiased and representative" prime minister.

16. (C) On National Dialogue sessions to discuss the defense strategy, Berri said President Michel Sleiman should select new criteria for membership following elections. Berri said Sleiman could choose any criteria he preferred, but the criteria must be clear. (Note: The National Dialogue

BEIRUT 00000674 002 OF 002

convened by Berri in 2006 had a minimum of four MPs elected to Parliament for a bloc to participate. End note.)

#### FULL TAIF IMPLEMENTATION

17. (C) Berri argued that the Taif agreement should be implemented in full, including the formation of a bicameral legislature and the establishment of a committee to discuss abolishing sectarianism. Berri supported the formation of a small senate with six or seven representatives from each of the key sects that would be charged with "big questions," such as decisions of war and peace and issues of major concern for each sect. A larger lower house elected without regard to sect would handle day-to-day operations of government.

18. (C) Berri admitted that formation of a senate would be unpopular among current MPs, who would have to cede some authority to the new body. He also supported formulating a new electoral law based on proportional representation to elect parliamentarians, a step he argued needed to be in place before two legislative bodies were formed.

19. (C) (Note: Lebanon had both a senate and parliament 1923-27, under the French Mandate. The parliament was non-sectarian and continued that way until 1943. The National Pact of that year established a 6-5 Christian-Muslim split of the seats in parliament and allocated the presidency to the Christians, the prime minister to the Sunnis and Speaker of the parliament to the Shia. The Taif Accord in 1990 changed the Christian-Muslim division of parliament to 50-50 and shifted some powers from the president to the prime minister. End note.)

#### NETANYAHU SPEECH "DANGEROUS"

110. (C) Berri, echoing other Lebanese leaders (reftel), called Israeli PM Netanyahu's June 17 speech "dangerous" and said it encouraged extremism in the region. Israel hoped to give the Palestinians less than what Lebanon gave to the

Palestinians, Berri assessed; "at least here they have arms," he added.

¶11. (C) Netanyahu's speech exacerbated Lebanese concerns that Palestinians could be resettled in Lebanon ("tawteen"), a move that would destabilize the country's fragile sectarian balance, Berri said. (Note: Leaders from across the political spectrum expressed opposition to "tawteen" during June 12 meetings with visiting Special Envoy for the Middle East George Mitchell.

¶12. (C) Berri commented on the "unique" circumstances in which all Lebanese political parties had accepted the June 7 election results in contrast to the Iranian election. Berri opined that the March 14 victory gave Lebanon and the region "a big window" for all Arab leaders "with the United States in hand" to demand moderation from the Israelis. Separately, Berri noted that the representative of his Amal party in Tehran had telephoned to voice his concern about the current situation there and had said he expected the instability to continue.

¶13. (U) The following day, Berri called publicly for a national unity cabinet. Talking to reporters after meeting June 17 with President Michel Sleiman, Berri also announced that he "nominated" Saad Hariri as Prime Minister.  
SISON